**The Individual and the Collective in Contemporary India: Manju Kapur's *Home* and *Custody***

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Manju Kapur is widely recognized as the 'great chronicler of the modern Indian family', and in charting the intricacies of middle-class familial life, marriage and divorce, her novels shed light on an urban society in flux (Govendar, 2012: np). Notably, India's shift towards a market economy provides the backdrop for two of her recent works of fiction: the latter sections of her 2006 novel *Home* are situated in 1980s and 1990s India, and her latest novel *Custody* (2011) is set firmly after the 'golden summer' of 1991, with the opening up of the country to 'international trade and the global economy' (Derné, 2008:15).

The cloth business owned by the Lal joint family in *Home* entails an obvious blurring of the line separating the world of work and the domestic sphere. It heightens the control and surveillance to which individual members of the clan are subjected; the firm also exposes the family as a collective to market forces, compelling it to modify the way it does business as well as how it lives. In *Custody* Shagun, a middle-class mother of two, chooses to end her arranged marriage with Raman in order to pursue a relationship with his boss Ashok, a highly successful corporate executive in the employ of a transnational drinks company. This portrayal may seem to suggest the triumph of individualist desire over familial obligations and, by extension, to signal the victory of modernity against tradition, with the former exemplifying 'the valourization of the individual over the collective' (Belliappa, 2013: 22). But, as my essay demonstrates, the transnational corporation in *Custody* is as powerful a

collective as the family in *Home*, one that also demands allegiance, though cultivating a different variety of conformity in the individual. Indeed, Kapur invites us to question the validity of modernity and tradition as necessarily oppositional concepts, often seen to be anchored in the individual/collective and private/public dichotomies. The two concepts are also frequently understood in terms of an 'east/west binary' (Narain, 2008: 79), as well as an anti-materialism/consumerism divide which is tied in with the 'protectionist' and 'liberalising' phases of Indian economic history (Mathur, 2010: 214). This essay examines the tensions as well as the affinities between tradition and modernity mapped in the two novels, which alert us to the forces, economic and otherwise, underpinning the construction of individual concerns and collective desires in post-liberalization India.

**Public and Private Lives**

In *Home* the cloth business established by Banwari Lal in Karol Bagh, Delhi, offers a 'natural' occupational destination for the male members of the family. It appears to present, especially during Banwari Lal's lifetime, an example of a unique kind of organization, referred to as the 'Undivided Hindu Joint Family Business', existing under the Mitakshara school of Hindu law applicable in most parts of India (Tulsian and Pandey, 2000: 5.5-5.6). Under this law, the 'karta', who is 'the eldest male member' of the family, manages the business in which each son acquires an interest by birth (Rajesh and Sivagnanasithi, 2009: 120). The sense of self for the male members of the clan, including Banwari Lal's two sons, Yashpal and Pyare, and later for his grandsons, is intimately tied in with the cloth shop. It also shapes their attitudes towards higher education, which is mostly viewed with disdain. Pyare Lal, for instance, refuses to graduate, claiming that 'the shop was his future; he saw no

reason to postpone its realization for the dreary memorizing that passed for education' (Kapur, 2006: 6). Almost two decades later, Yashpal's son Raju is unperturbed by his failure to excel in school and feels secure in the knowledge that all that is required of him was to 'pass' (2006: 182). Within the family a degree of collective pride is attached to the fact that the men do not need to acquire an education for the purposes of earning a living.

But as Kapur demonstrates, it is not just the men but the entire Lal household, including the women and children who, though not directly involved in the running of the business, are aware of its rhythm and its tempo, which in turn set the pace for their lives at home. Indeed, the family home and shop together form a formidable collective:

> […] in the ways of the house, the shop was central: travelling for it, buying for it, fighting for it, working and planning for it, collecting its outstanding dues from the market, dealing with its defaulters, being vigilant about shoddy goods, being let down by wholesalers not as scrupulous as they, being worried about weavers and mills, striving to keep their reputation pristine. (2006: 57)

This complicity between the two arenas amplifies the control exercised over the individual members of the clan: every effort is made to maintain the 'jointness' of the home and the business. Paradoxically, to ensure its cohesion, membership of the family business rests on exclusionary politics. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere, Banwari Lal's grandson Vicky is a 'subordinated' male in the family hierarchy by virtue of being his daughter's son, and is denied the privileges accorded to the other grandsons (Mirza, 2015). Architecture, too, is important in maintaining a sense of the collective. For instance, when Pyare Lal gets married, the mere suggestion of a separate kitchen for the newlyweds is seen as a threat to familial unity: 'Separate kitchens led to a sense of mine and yours, dissatisfaction, emotional division, and an

eventual parting of the ways' (2006:13). In particular, it is in the choice of marital partners that the family/business exerts its influence, with marriages arranged with 'care' so that the bride's dowry would allow the business to grow; not surprisingly, falling in love is seen as a divisive exercise of individual choice and deemed 'detrimental to these interests' (2006: 4). The marriage of each individual member of the family is very much a collective decision. This is not to say that attempts by a male member to marry a woman of his choice are thwarted outright, but a 'love marriage' such as that of Yashpal and Sona's, is viewed with dismay, if not active hostility. The preliminaries preceding a Lal wedding are often akin to a business negotiation, with the matter of the future bride and groom meeting each other reduced to an afterthought: 'The girl had been seen, the boy had been seen, the prices agreed upon, and now the only thing left was for the young people to meet each other' (2006: 160).

Kapur's subtle portrayal of the joint family does not simplistically render it synonymous with tyrannical oppression; she depicts several instances of genuine goodwill and support within the clan (for instance, the way they rally around Yashpal's daughter Nisha to help her set up a ready-to-wear clothing line). But the 'jointness' of the familial structure also contributes to perpetuating traditional gendered roles. For example, since the men in the family are not highly qualified, their brides are expected to be even more deficient in higher education, with qualifications beyond an undergraduate degree by correspondence perceived with suspicion. Control over female sexuality is particularly stringent within the family and its right to exercise this control, as Kapur demonstrates, has been internalized to a considerable extent by the women. Even when alone with her boyfriend Suresh, especially during moments of physical intimacy, Nisha is unable to fully rid herself of

the family's in absentia collective, condemnatory gaze 'fixed on her' (2006: 189). For Nisha, the excitement of pursuing a relationship with Suresh partially stems from the realization that he sees her as an individual, rather than as a member of the Lal tribe, hinting at her desire for an identity distinct from that of her family. She appreciates, for instance, that he admires her beauty on its own terms rather than as a reflection of her mother's 'greater beauty' and that if he compliments her on her clothing, it is 'not a comment on Banwari Lal merchandising' (2006: 147).

Nisha's awareness of the tensions between individual and collective identities becomes heightened when Suresh suggests that she cut her long hair. Long, thick hair, often worn in a braid, is the 'essence of traditional beauty' in India and deeply conscious of it being considered a 'family treasure', which reflects her status on the arranged-marriage market, Nisha is apprehensive about cutting hers (2006: 148). The individual act of getting a haircut carries considerable significance for the family also because of the cultural meaning of short hair on a woman, which is seen 'as a statement of "modernity" along Western lines' (Miller, 1998: 264). No wonder then that for Nisha, this decision is cast in antagonistic terms, compelling her to choose between an 'outsider and her family, modernity and custom, independence and community' (2006: 150). However, and it is important to point this out, despite being dismayed initially, the family is placated to find that Nisha's new hairstyle enhances rather than detracts from her already striking looks. It creates a resemblance with Suriya (a fictional Bollywood actress) and thereby is seen to increase her chances of finding a husband, indicating that 'modernity' and 'tradition' may not be entirely incompatible. The fetishization of female beauty, though its criteria may change, is as important a part of traditional North Indian culture as it is of the 'culture-ideology of consumerism' which fuels global capitalism (Sklair, 2002: 47). As I discuss below,

Kapur underscores these continuities between modernity and tradition in the context of the 'value' of women's looks in dowry negotiations.

Upon discovering Nisha's relationship with her lower-class, lower-caste boyfriend, the family is disappointed not only because Nisha has defied tradition by falling in love, but also because she has chosen a man with whom marriage will result in no benefit for the family business. Suresh is in fact paid off by the clan to hasten the end of the relationship. Nisha's mother Sona bemoans the fact that while Nisha's cousin Vijay got 'his wife from Fancy Furnishings', another thriving family ~~business~~ firm and thereby led to the expansion of the Lal cloth business, her daughter sought her future partner in 'the street' (2006: 198). Sona's reaction may seem surprising since she herself was considered an unsuitable match for Yashpal, for very similar reasons, by the Lals. But upon becoming Yashpal's wife and, despite the initial marginalization that she faced within the family as a childless woman, Sona unquestioningly accepts the familial logic that equates the interests of the individual members of the family with those of the cloth shop.

The middle-classes depicted in *Custody* draw their economic prosperity from employment in transnational corporations and, as Kapur (2015b: 347) has pointed out in a recent interview, 'working with a multinational helps support a lifestyle that is more individual in many ways'. The novel does include the depiction of joint families, both functional (for instance, Raman's uncle's family) and dysfunctional (Raman's second wife Ishita's former in-laws who reject her for being infertile). But *Custody* focuses primarily on 'the break-up of traditional family structures' and on more visibly modern familial configurations (Kapur 2015a: 100). Rather than a condemnation, it is an exploration of the nuclear family (that Shagun and Raman form with their two children) but also of the reconstituted families that the two create with

their new partners. Despite the family being organized along the lines of individualism (Shagun, for instance, refuses to live with her in-laws), in *Custody*, much like in *Home*, the domestic arena is intimately entwined with the world of work, specifically with the workings of 'The Brand', referred to consistently in the text with a capitalized definite article. The definite article not only alerts the reader to the company's immense socio-economic power but also allows it to work as a symbol for transnational corporations in general which, as Sklair (2000:47) has argued, propel global capitalism. 'The Brand' is, of course, a thinly veiled reference to Coca-Cola, which is worth 'one-tenth of the GDP of India' (Fernando, 2010: 5.16); it re-entered India in 1993 following its departure in 1977 'after refusing to accept the terms of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, which reduced foreign ownership and equity to 40 per cent in companies that produced consumer goods' (Aiyer, 2007: 653). Kapur (2015b: 347) has pointed out that she was not looking to necessarily write about a transnational soft drinks firm; the corporation could have been 'any company that shared the same profile'. This profile, as we will see below, includes not only a massive consumer base and global presence but also some very public controversies about the corporation's lack of responsibility towards the environment, public health and impoverished communities in India.

Unlike the Lal family business, ~~as we saw above,~~ employment in a multinational such as 'The Brand' is a consequence of specialized academic qualifications: Raman has technical undergraduate and postgraduate degrees from the Indian Institute of Technology, Delhi and the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad respectively, while Ashok was educated at Harvard Business School. Once employed, becoming successful in the corporation requires an unquestioning pursuit of its goals and entails a single mindedness that calls for a blurring of the

home/work divide: ‘A man who was not obsessed by his marketing figures, eating, sleeping, dreaming to their rhythms, such a man rarely produced outstanding results’ (2012: 6). ~~Not only does~~ ‘The Brand’ not only features as an important character in Shagun and Raman’s marriage, but also plays a major part in Shagun's affair with Ashok.

Shagun’s extra-marital relationship with and her eventual marriage to Ashok do ostensibly contrast with her arranged marriage with Raman, which took place when she was only twenty years old. Her second pregnancy was an accident, preventing her from pursuing a career. Shagun’s decision to follow her desires and pursue personal happiness, despite the pain that it brings to her mother and children, can be seen as an act of individualism that rejects collectivist and familial pressures. When he finds Shagun dithering about formally ending her marriage, Ashok expresses his intention to whisk her away from the ‘narrow social set-up’ that has been her life in Delhi so far, reminding her that they ‘have one life to live and everybody wants to live it the best they can’ (2012: 81). Ashok frames Shagun’s dilemma in the context of a wider struggle which pits ‘traditional versus modern values’, the ‘individual versus society’ (2012: 81). He is critical of the constraints imposed on the individual ‘in this benighted country’ because of the prevailing concern for the collective and for ‘what others think’ (2012: 81). While describing her children’s suffering as well as Raman’s grief resulting from the divorce, Kapur does not condemn Shagun’s choice to end the marriage. Indeed, despite the bitter custody battle with Raman, Shagun’s second marriage is much more satisfying, both emotionally and sexually. Yet, Ashok’s narrow, almost obsessive devotion to ‘The Brand’, often depicted with humour in the text, invites us to question the boundary separating modernity and tradition and as well as freedom and conformity in contemporary India.

Early in the novel, while in the midst of a private conversation with Shagun about the consequences of her husband discovering their affair, Ashok begins discussing Raman's success at promoting Mang-Oh!, 'The Brand's' recently launched drink. For Ashok, the private and the public, philanthropy and commerce, intermingle and become indistinguishable, and in cataloguing and paying tribute to Raman's services to 'The Brand', he appears to forget that they are rivals in love:

> But he is performing brilliantly. And working hard, doing promotional activities, getting celebs and sponsors. He has successfully created a demand for Mang-oh! in six cities and incidentally increased the sales of water and beverages. We are now moving into permanent commitments, donating refrigerators, refurbishing school canteens, on the condition that only our products are sold [...] Shagun did wish that everything didn't have to ceaselessly revert to The Brand. (2012: 78-79)

The decisions that Ashok makes about this intensely private matter are clearly based on his position as an employee of 'The Brand', as he informs his lover: 'Sweetheart, the first thing we have to do towards planning our future is inform the company of our relationship […]We are in the same organization, your husband and I. We have to make a disclosure about anything that affects its working' (2012: 80). Moreover, Ashok's sense of right and wrong is defined in terms of his duty to the company and its goal to maximize ~~profits~~sales. He even frowns upon employees questioning 'The Brand's' products: 'Never criticize your product: breathe it, believe in it, make it your religion' (2012: 7). The use of the word 'religion' underscores how closely his sense of both morality and obligation are linked to the multinational firm. While experiencing no remorse over blatantly pursuing another man's wife, he is discomfited by the 'obvious conflict of interest' resulting from that fact that both he and Raman work for The Brand (2012: 34). Moreover, Ashok's recourse to managerial terms when discussing his romantic relationship with Shagun, brings to

the fore his lack of a 'private' vocabulary: 'In business you were always fighting to keep your position, because if you didn't go ahead, you started to decline. And it was turning out to be true of love as well. Should he leave its management to Shagun, he was sure the whole relationship would be doomed.' (2012: 80) The reader is aware of the depth of his tenderness for Shagun and his desire to build a life with her, but even in the matters of the heart, The Brand looms large. One of the strategies that Ashok deploys to win her over, for instance, is to offer Shagun a modelling assignment in a Mang-oh! advertisement. In fact, his desire to make The Brand's products successful in India echoes and reinforces his intention to 'possess' Shagun: 'To woo her would thus be that much more difficult: he must first create a need before he could fulfil it. But he was used to creating needs, it was what he did for a living.' (*Custody* 4)

The harmony between Ashok's personal aspirations and those of The Brand is disturbingly complete: he sees the prospect of maximizing the sales of its products in India as 'a spectacular achievement, both in personal and professional terms' (2012: 2-3). Raman's sense of self too is informed by his position at 'The Brand', much of which has to do with the financial and other privileges ('recognition, bonuses and incentives') accruing from his employment there (2012: 84). When he does discover the affair, Raman never seriously contemplates leaving the firm and despite his newfound hatred for him, cannot forget that Ashok is his immediate superior at work. Instead, desiring Ashok's public humiliation, the only possible line of action that Raman can imagine involves The Brand's hierarchical corporate structure, as he considers approaching the 'PR head office or the PR section in New York' (2012: 85). Thus, even when angry and grief-stricken, he is wary of The Brand's power structure. Later in the text, when referring to the money, medicines and water donated by the company to the victims of an earthquake in Northern India, in a private conversation

with his new wife Ishita, Raman is unable to separate himself from the firm. As highlighted by his use of the collective pronoun 'we' and the collective possessive pronoun 'our' in the following excerpt, he effectively melds his individual self with The Brand's corporate identity: '"It's our corporate sense of responsibility," said Raman. "We know how to give back."' (2012: 327)

**Consumption, Spending and Identity**

The nature and quantity of goods and services consumed are central to the construction of individual and collective identities in the two novels. Both texts are explicitly preoccupied with money. The narrative in *Home*, for instance, includes references to the fee paid to the architect for the extension of the Lal shop and the bribe given to the municipality officials for its illegal expansion. Similarly, in *Custody*, the reader is made privy to the salaries earned by Ashok and Raman and how they are spent. Indeed, the texts' concern with financial matters echoes the central characters' constant preoccupation with money and underscores the extent to which their sense of self and collective is defined by not only what this money can buy, but also what it *should* buy.

The narrative in *Home* opens in the year 1965 and covers over three decades punctuated by several weddings. Kapur catalogues in detail the various goods brought in (or not) as dowry by each bride who becomes a member of the Lal clan, throwing into doubt the supposed anti-materialist proclivities of the pre-liberalization era. When Pyare Lal gets married in the 1960s, for instance, his father-in-law gifts him a scooter and furnishes 'the four rooms of the second storey with a fully stocked kitchen, fridge, cooler, double bed, dining table, chairs, and an upholstered sofa set in red velvet' (2006: 13). Dowries are considered by the family as a means to solidify

the home and the business and this traditional practice, as Kapur's novel illustrates, is 'modernized' in the face of socio-economic changes, with the goods expected of the bride's family reflecting trends in the wider consumer culture (Dwyer, 2011: 188). In the late 1990s, Yashpal's son Raju's bride Pooja brings to her marital home, among other things, 'quantities of cash, a car, a fridge, air-conditioner, a TV, a Godrej cupboard, a double bed with a deluxe foam mattress, a dressing table, twenty-one sets of jewellery' and 'countless watches' (2006: 254). Instead of contesting the tradition of dowry taking, liberalization reinforces it by 'raising the grooms' expectations of goods' in keeping with a 'growing consumer culture' (Bhatia, 2004: 114). Moreover, rising consumerism in contemporary India collaborates happily with the 'patriarchal mandate that makes physical beauty a necessary factor for women's survival and prosperity' (Amirtham, 2011: 74). Indeed, the excessively lavish dowry given by Pooja's family is partly meant to compensate for her socially constructed physical flaws: 'the girl had a scar and scars had to be paid for' (2006: 254). In *Home*, liberalization and changing consumer patterns are shown to bring in their wake certain changes in gendered roles but as Kapur reveals, within a traditional business family such as the Lals, these changes are slow to manifest themselves and remain fairly limited: Nisha's clothing line is established with her family's financial support and her entrepreneurship skills can only be displayed under the Lal umbrella (even her tailoring facility is located in the basement of the family home). More importantly, Nisha is compelled to give up her business when she gets married.

It is the metropolitan middle classes in India who have disproportionately benefited from economic liberalization, with new consumption patterns developing to display middle-class social status (Waldrop, 2011: 171). One particular form of consumption that Kapur brings to the fore in *Custody* is foreign travel. As Raman and

Choudary (2014: 116-117) point out, while India 'has always had a certain exotic appeal for Western tourists, domestic and international travel by Indians has seen a spurt following the post-liberalization era with vacationing become the norm among the growing middle class'. When Raman is recruited by The Brand's marketing department with a salary of 10 lakhs a year 'Shagun and Raman celebrated by going to Europe for their summer holidays' (2012: 16). Before the affair begins, Shagun and her husband, and their corporate friends are eagerly anticipating travelling to England for the 1999 cricket world cup. Spending and consumption of this sort are alien to Raman's parents: his father is a retired engineer who worked in the Public Works Department and his parents are accustomed to 'operating under the constraints of a government salary' and 'used to guarding family resources' (2012: 16-19). Shagun is aware of this sudden lifestyle shift, and she recognizes that for her and other corporate wives, 'the success of their ~~husband's~~ husbands'jobs added to the things that they could buy and the places they could visit. Even six or seven years ago, would it have been possible for him to consider going abroad to watch the Indian cricket team?' (2012: 9).

As *Custody* illustrates, class identity in contemporary India has a distinct transnational quality. It manifests itself in the travel patterns of middle-class Indians, their penchant for foreign brands as well as the itinerant lifestyle of those working in the upper echelons of multinational corporations. We see Ashok moving from India to the United States, then back to India (before a stint in Belgium), only to return to the United States with Shagun. At the close of the novel, he is posted in Singapore as The Brand's head of region in South-East Asia. In fact, a significant part of Ashok's appeal for Shagun is his aura of foreignness. Shagun realizes that she would not have hesitated from rejecting the advances of a 'home-grown Indian', but not wanting to

'seem unsophisticated' in the eyes of Ashok who 'had been imported from abroad' she agrees to be wooed by him, revelling in his 'admiration' for her (2012: 11). In a similar vein, Ashok is drawn to the cosmopolitan nature of Shagun's beauty; with her fair skin and 'greenish eyes', he sees her as 'a perfect blend of East and West' (2012: 4). Even in *Home,* the post-liberalization consumption patterns of the Lal family's younger members reflect a degree of transnationality. For instance, the dowry given by Pooja's family to Yashpal's son Raju includes an all-expenses-paid honeymoon in Europe. Moreover, the desired skills in a Lal bride have become internationalized to a certain extent, though her designated primary role is still homemaking and child-rearing. Among Pyare Lal's daughter-in-law Rekha's much-touted qualities is her ability to cook 'Continental vegetarian' food and to decorate eggless chocolate cakes with 'Cadbury Gems' (2006: 160). Rekha's hybrid cooking skills, combining a traditional vegetarian cuisine with foreign frills suggest another form which the co-existence of tradition and modernity may assume (2006: 160).

Kapur's *Home* also maps the important changes in the patterns of consumer spending with respect to clothing even before the full-blown liberalization reforms of the early 1990s. In the mid-1980s, as Jyothsna Belliappa explains, the Rajiv Gandhi-led government deregulated several industries and reduced the tax on consumer goods, 'giving impetus to consumerism' among the middle-classes (Belliappa, 2013: 60). In particular, the Lal business has to come to grips with an irreversible trend: the rising popularity of ready to wear clothing (2006: 114). At the close of the eighties, 'Western clothing chains slashed their way into Indian markets, cutting wide commercial swathes. Benetton came in the late 1980s, followed by Wrangler, Levis, Calvin Klein et al. The Banwari Lal cloth shop needed to keep up, if not with the Western styles than with Indian ready-made, to which women were increasingly

turning' (2006: 115). But the traditional authority that Banwari Lal wields by virtue of his age and role as the eldest male member of the family clashes with the 'ideas of the younger generation': Banwari Lal is deeply resistant to selling ready-made clothing as his grandsons insist they must do, believing instead in the 'timeless appeal' of the sari (2006: 115-116). Through her depiction of this internal familial/business conflict, Kapur highlights the often-painful transition from one economic mode to another and the generational dissonance to which it inevitably gives rise. But as she demonstrates once again, modernity does not mechanically replace and necessitate jettisoning traditional values: in *Home* it leads to a negotiation between the two approaches and change is postponed rather than rejected to ensure the survival of traditional hierarchies *and* the competitiveness of the business. Yashpal and Pyare defer to the ageing patriarch's desire for things to 'remain the same' and it is only after his death that the changes are implemented (2006: 116). Alongside modifying the way the Lals do business, the 1990s also transform their living arrangements. Without abdicating communal living entirely, the house (with its shared kitchen and common bathroom on each floor) is demolished to build a new one, in which bedrooms have attached bathrooms and each floor has its own kitchen, fully equipped with modern conveniences.

If funds brought by a new bride as dowry continue to be ploughed into the family business, as was done during the decades preceding liberalization, the manner in which money is now invested in the shop undergoes a visible change. When Vijay's marriage is arranged with Rekha (a member of the Fancy Furnishings clan), her dowry is used to buy the flat above the shop so as to allow the business to expand, a move that Banwari Lal had resisted. But the younger members of the clan also wish to spend money decorating the shop according to modern standards, a plan which

clashes with the Banwari Lal's sons' more traditional approach to doing business: 'A shop was a shop—goods made it special, not extravagant decorations' (2006: 162). Kapur draws our attention to the rise of superstores in India, which as Naomi Klein (2000: 151) explains, are places 'not only to shop but also visit, places to which tourists make ritualistic pilgrimages'. Eventually, Yashpal and Pyare give in to the younger men's logic as they are compelled to accept that the practice of buying and selling consumer goods has radically changed in post-liberalization India, with shops 'masquerading as five-star hotels' (2006: 114). Kapur highlights the older generation's discomfort with this new, emphasis on 'show' which they believe detracts from the essential business of selling cloth (2006: 164). But the new generation is only too aware that goods alone no longer speak for themselves: how, when and where their products are sold have become paramount considerations in ensuring the survival of the family business in this new economic climate.

In a recent interview Kapur (2015b: 347) has evoked the 'obsession with multinationals' in India today, and the rise of branding as a cultural phenomenon. Both *Home* and *Custody* grapple with the fundamental differences between traditional and modern ways of selling a product—whether it is fabric or a fizzy drink. The Lal family had never actively promoted their products but with the rise of consumerism and the arrival of foreign brands, they are compelled to consciously market their wares. Some of the promotional activities that they undertake include updating the name of the family business (The Banwari Lal and Sons Bridal Showroom) and placing advertisements in 'newspapers, on the billboards around Karol Bagh, on telephone poles, and on trees' (2006: 264). While 'they had never been so aggressive' in marketing the family business (2006: 264), these activities appear quite sedate when compared to the strategies deployed by The Brand to increase its sales, which

include paying millions of rupees to Bollywood superstars as well as local celebrities within specific states to endorse its products, sponsoring local events in schools and colleges and devising advertisements in regional languages such as Punjabi (2012: 8, 43-44). More generally, the differences in the two approaches draw our attention to the divergent practices of 'advertising' and 'branding'. As Naomi Klein (2000: 21) points out, 'advertising is about hawking product. Branding, in its truest and most advanced incarnations, is about corporate transcendence'. Branding as a broad-range marketing approach involves evoking 'values, meanings and reputations' (Moor, 2007: 15). It often entails 'the universal penetration of private and, indeed, public life' which stirs up emotions and fosters consumer loyalty (Holzer, 2010: 61). Moreover, as Kapur demonstrates tellingly through Ashok's, and to a lesser extent, Raman's character, branding strategies seek as much to captivate costumers as to colonize 'employees' hearts and minds in the strict service of accumulation' (Brannan et al., 2011: 2). As we saw above, both Ashok's and Raman's individual selves are inextricably bound to The Brand's corporate identity.

**Loyalties and Conformities**

Within the context of corporate branding and identity, Ashok's allegiance to the Brand is worthy of closer analysis. Equally relevant is how collective loyalty manifests itself in *Home*. I am interested in examining the idea of loyalty since it is often crucial in 'furnishing identity' and in binding the individual with the collective, primarily because loyalty 'denotes membership and belonging' (Conner 2007: 5).

In *Custody*, Kapur charts Ashok's unwillingness to entertain any criticism of The Brand's products. Some of the accusations made against The Brand draw on actual criticisms levelled against the Coca-ColaCompany in India by NGOs and civil

rights groups for its actions damaging the environment and indigenous communities:

> Every morning when he opened the newspaper it was to find The Brand being accused of fresh instances of callous capitalist behaviour. An NGO had objected to the fact that it took 2.5 litres to make 1 litre of a drink with no nutritional value. On purely circumstantial evidence they were being linked to depleted groundwater resources and debt-ridden farmers. Unfortunately nobody waited for allegations to be proved before multinational-bashing took place. (2012: 140)

As Foulsham (2011: 124) explains, many communities in India where Coca-Cola bottling plants were located experienced severe drops in the water table. In villages such as Plachimada in Kerala the drop in the water table made irrigation impossible, resulting in the loss of crops; moreover, drinking water sources dried up, forcing people to make long journeys in search of safe water. But Ashok is singularly concerned with The Brand's sales figures and does not consider verifying the veracity of the accusations (which could perhaps shake the foundations of his faith in the company). The use of free indirect speech in the passage above emphasizes the extent to which Ashok has internalized the capitalist logic underpinning the activities of The Brand, and how he chooses to interpret any accusations against it as empty ideological posturing against transnational corporations. Ashok's loyalties are not aligned along racial or nationalistic lines, rather his sense of belonging is rooted in the multinational firm. Through it, he has become a part of a transnational capitalist class whose members 'see their own interests and/or the interests of their social and/or ethnic group [...]as best served by an identification with the interests of the capitalist global system (Sklair, 2002: 9).

To quote another example that illustrates Ashok's loyalty to the corporation and his membership of a transnational capitalist class, when the E. coli bacterium is found in the company's bottled water, Ashok sees the reports as a conspiracy

'instigated by Indian manufacturers who hate *our* presence here' (2012: 240, emphasis mine). It is this identification, which nourishes Ashok's (wilful?) blindness to certain pressing realities, including the unsavoury activities of the corporation. Given the harmony between his personal interests and The Brand's pursuits, as I discussed above, it is not surprising that Ashok can extol the virtues of liberalization in India without a trace of irony: 'Ten years ago you couldn't get a Coke, pizza or burger here. There wasn't even colour TV, for fuck's sake. And now? *Everything*.' (2012: 81, emphasis mine). Ashok's use of the all-encompassing word 'everything' brings to the fore his profound lack of awareness of the extreme poverty in which the vast majority of Indians live. His notion of 'everything' is based on the ready availability of consumer products whose role in ensuring human survival and well-being is dubious at best, while he is supremely impatient of those condemning The Brand's activities which deprive farmers and their families of as basic a necessity as water. Ashok's worldview reveals a serious indifference towards *other* individual and collective concerns which stand in the way of The Brand tapping into its potential base of 'a billion' customers (2012: 2). Ironically, despite his deep hostility towards societal conformity and his celebration of individualistic desires, Ashok's main task as a Brand employee is to *cultivate* mass conformity: 'no hand should be without a beverage manufactured by The Brand' (2012: 6). As Tuchman (2009: 48-49) points out, rather than producing 'difference', branding works to create 'minute variations' between virtually indistinguishable products, and the supposed 'search for individuation' is very much a part of conformity.

In *Home*, too, Kapur reveals how loyalty towards a collective, the joint family, can breed blindness to certain obvious realities, particularly when Nisha develops severe eczema which does not respond to a wide range of medical treatments. The Lal

clan begins monitoring her skin, it becoming a 'family duty to stop Nisha from itching' (2006: 232). Yet Nisha is aware of being acutely 'alone' in her struggle against her own skin (2006: 233). Her illness appears to be caused by psychological and emotional distress resulting from the collapse of her relationship with Suresh (with her family's 'encouragement', as we saw above), but perhaps more so from the repeated sexual abuse that she suffered as a child at the hands of her cousin Vicky in the family home. As Nisha submits herself to various treatments, an employee at a nature cure centre opines to her mother Sona that her condition may be symptomatic of 'some disturbance in the family' (2006: 234). Sona's loyalty renders her unwilling to entertain the idea that Nisha's pain might in any way stem from the actions of the joint family. Her categorical denial squarely places the blame on external, malevolent influences: 'there has been no disturbance…my daughter has had no shocks whatsoever…It is the evil eye that has cursed my home' (2006: 234). It is only later when the suggestion is framed in 'abstract' terms by a doctor, with no direct reference to the family (and hence, cannot be read as a threat to its reputation or its cohesion) that Sona is willing to accept that her daughter's suffering may have an 'emotional' cause (2006: 240). This public denial of the possibility of the collective failing the individual hints at the power of the joint family as an ideology. It is only when individual and collective interests are directly in discord that we see a member of the family expressing dissatisfaction with it. For instance, during the first ten years of her marriage, Sona would frequently share with her sister Rupa her feelings of frustration and insecurity stemming from her mother-in-law's hostility towards her for failing to produce an heir. But upon becoming pregnant, she is quick to dismiss the disapproval she suffered in the house and even justifies it. Sona now readily embraces the family's power structure that rewards fertility and has no place for a barren woman: 'It is the

way of the world', she reminds Rupa glibly (2006: 35). Furthermore, instead of recognizing and questioning the joint family's capacity, or rather tendency, to 'prey upon its weaker members' (Kapur, 2015b: 348), Sona in turn becomes complicit in its injustices when she treats her dead sister-in-law's son, the ten-year-old Vicky, arguably the most marginalized member of the family, with unmitigated antagonism (Mirza, 2015).

Taken together, *Home* and *Custody* invite a reflection on the seemingly obvious conflicts and the surprising commonalities between what are perceived to be traditional and modern values. Moreover, in depicting the tension as well as the congruence between changing individual and collective identities, the two novels read neither as an outright condemnation of economic liberalization nor as a categorical celebration of traditional modes of living and doing business. Instead, through her exploration of the workings of two formidable collectives, which intertwine economic considerations with emotional concerns and challenge the line dividing the public and the private, Manju Kapur not only reveals the complex positioning of the individual along a tradition-modernity continuum, but also compels us to reconsider the very notion of conformity in India today.

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